

Amy Wu

Graduation project proposal
Networked Media, Media Design
Piet Zwart Institute
Jan 12th 2012

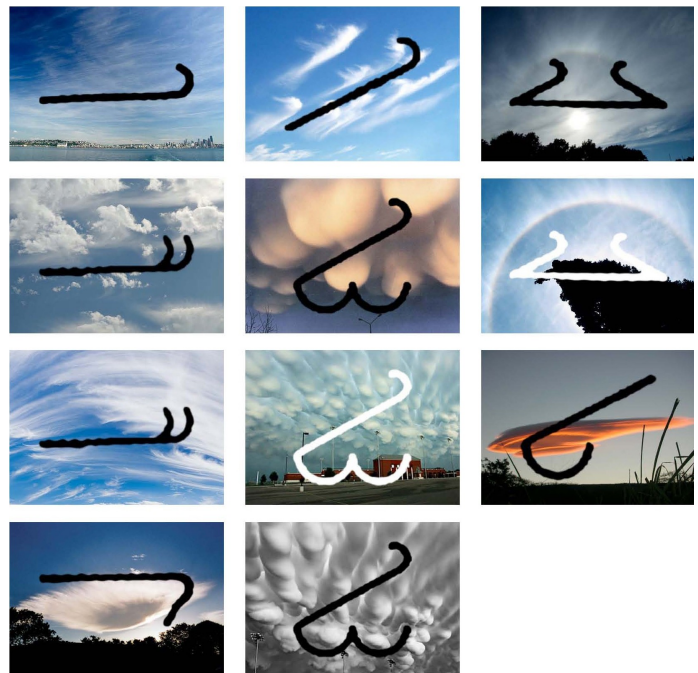
Aims and objectives

I would like to construct an alternative forecast system which will metaphorically allude to discourse regimes which shape reality. Whilst thinking about using cloud formations as a way to interpret the future, I discovered the practice of *aeromancy*, an ancient form of divination that looks to the air and sky for inspiration. This particularly concerns itself with cloud shapes, comets and other phenomenon not normally visible in the heavens. The international code for depicting cloud types are ideograms based on the nomenclature system of 19th century amateur meteorologist, Luke Howard. Through this visual code (figure 1), and other examples mentioned later, I will continue to experiment with mechanisms of pareidolia to narrativise the construction of meaning and animate perception as 'constructed belief'. Through this system, strategies of prediction as reality producing and forms of belief systems can be experientially engaged with to reflect on how other speculative systems behave. My hope is that by interacting with this system, the interplay between human agency and external agency will be meditated on while the meaning of meaning will be questioned.

What this system will forecast specifically is still undecided, however I've been researching about companies such as Epapogix and Platinum Blue that provide prediction services for the film and music industry, respectively. As a film-maker, you can run your script through Epapogix's algorithms and they can tell you the monetary value of it – if it will be a 30 million or 500 million dollar movie. One possibility is to use Epapogix's model to reflect upon the potential monetary value of an artistic idea/artwork, and thus predicting its success. What does it mean to run a 'subjective' (artistic) idea through an algorithm and measure its potential value (monetary, therapeutic, social, etc), therefore preemptively suggesting whether or not it is worth continuing with? In thinking about Hume's notion of beauty as purely a subjective experience, this idea may offer insight into the search for 'objectivity' taking place in today's techno-scientific discourse and interrogate this as one of many other possible interpretations. Thus, I would like to continue to work with the cloud system as a prediction method. Perhaps the ephemerality of clouds can even lend itself to symbolising the immateriality of ideas. Spatially, there are a number of possibilities: a very loose interpretation of a technological 'gypsy caravan', the weather lab, the metrological office, the floor of the stock exchange, the TV weather room. In short, any number of *places where the conditions that support prediction* apply. The support structures of such environments are linguistic, semiotic and material.

Code No.	CH	Description (Abridged From International Code)	3
1	—	Filaments of Ci, or "mares tails," scattered and not increasing	
2	—	Dense Ci in patches or twisted sheaves, usually not increasing, sometimes like remains of Cb; or towers or tufts	
3	—	Dense Ci, often anvil-shaped, derived from or associated with Cb	
4	—	Ci, often hook-shaped, gradually spreading over the sky and usually thickening as a whole	
5	—	Ci and Cs, often in converging bands, or Cs alone; generally overspreading and growing denser; the continuous layer not reaching 45° altitude	
6	—	Ci and Cs, often in converging bands, or Cs alone; generally overspreading and growing denser; the continuous layer exceeding 45° altitude	
7	—	Veil of Cs covering the entire sky	
8	—	Cs not increasing and not covering entire sky	
9	—	Cc alone or Cc with some Ci or Cs, but the Cc being the main cirriform cloud	

Figure 1: Tropospheric classification of clouds.
Source: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cloud>



Visual exercise in matching codes with corresponding image of clouds.

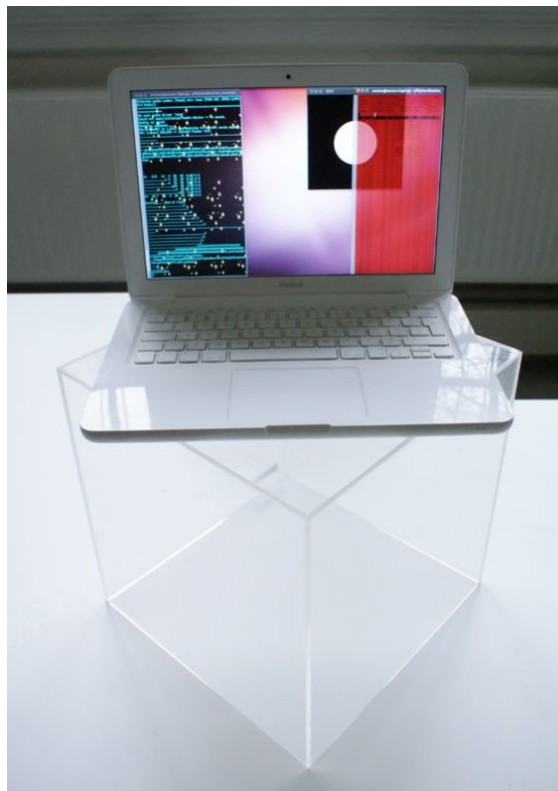
Recursive patterns

Central to my recent work is looking at how technoscience (as a concept referring to the increasingly blurry traditional borders of science as 'the act of knowing' and technology as 'the act of doing') narrativises the world. I am interested in how people construct webs of meaning based on the prevailing set of values within each time frame and how that negotiates the perception, reflection and projection of ourselves in relation to the universe we inhabit. For example, in the 19th century, the era of scientism and industrialism, science became a kind of religion expected to provide instant explanations for everything.

Since then, the promise of technology has only been exacerbated by cultural and ideological trends. Modern myths are an embodiment of ideological parables in which orthodox values are naturalised so that they may appear innocent and 'common sense.' They are strategic in nature used to impose the dominant value systems. The myth that humanity and civilisation would be freed of its constraints by inventing artificial compensational technologies started the ascend of the dream of progress of technoutopianism. Reflections on the slippery metaphysicality of temporality is also another recurring motif present in my work. I have also been interested in how the mechanism of desire and belief produce realities. These concepts have been further explored through various projects in the past year.

Previous work

Meditation Machine



The Meditation Machine arose from the myth of technology as a mechanism capable of compensating for our inherent flaws and transcend human deficiencies – a *Deus ex Machina*. Technology as a compensation machine (Kluitenberg, 2005) then becomes the embodiment of its' inventors projected irrational desires, however are always falling short of expectation – because the very nature of desire lies in its unattainability. From this line of thought, technology is thus the physical manifestation of irrational desires which cannot

be satisfied. As a rhetorical gesture, I attempt to free my laptop of its' inventors desires by way of meditation. I was inspired by the meditation techniques of the Shambhala teachings of Tibetan Buddhists. The goal of this practice is to direct full attention to breathing while the act of thinking should be given little attention so that it remains in the background. Adapting this into a digital realm, I created an environment for my laptop to focus on its interior landscape so that conceptually, it became a system of responsive, self-reflexive inter-relations. Using the metaphor of my laptop's CPU(the computer's internal processing) as the body's energy flow I sonically amplified it's CPU fluctuating information into a low droning sound resembling a kind of heart beat or flow of breath. This audio was then visualised taking the form of a pulsating white circle.

Benji



Set in the future, Benji is a fictitious entity that journeys into the world of bio-information as a commodity and consequently envisions the prospects of genetic discrimination and the increasing personalisation of marketing strategies. Named after the child of Sergey Brin, co-founder of Google.com and Anne Wojcicki, co-founder of 23andme.com (a privately held personal genomics and biotechnology company), Benji represents the ideological and economic union as historically practiced in royal political marriages and commonly witnessed in corporate mergers.

I invented an allegorical world where I could take the privacy debate onto the genetic level and into the potential future. In this world genetic information is under central control of a private multinational DNA search engine called Benji. Through this project, I wanted to highlight and problematise the activities of centralising health and DNA records. A plausible consequence is genetic discrimination as witnessed during the eugenics movement earlier on last century. Secondly, as a reflection on the pharmaceutical industry working towards personalised, custom-made medicine, I wanted to push the limits of bio-information as a commodity - targeted advertising at its most efficient. Finally, what was also interesting was the kind of reverence to the mysterious power of the veiled search engine. It is veiled because the inner-workings of the search results powered by secret algorithms are shrouded by a 'black box'. Reflecting on the irrational and yet convincing mechanisms of belief experienced in fortune telling and horoscopes, a certain willingness to believe is perhaps key in creating more possibilities to discriminate. Perhaps trivial, though compelling, empathy and the desire to relate, plays a major role. Psychologically, it functions as a kind of self fulfilling prophecy, a desire which pre-empts and causes realities.

Research framework for graduation project proposal

'To foretell an event is to provoke it; in social psychology this is called "self-fulfilling prophecies." - Alejandro Jodorowsky

"If men define situations as real, they are real in their consequences" -W. I. Thomas

My overarching research for the project and thesis will explore how forecasting as; 1) a projection of our desires, 2) an interpretative system, and 3) a control mechanism, produces reality. It will be a research on systemics reflecting the choreography of cybernetics (feedback loop systems) and speculation. Through case studies from discourses such as economy (stock market predictions), meteorology (weather predictions), and culture (predictions of hit movies and music), I will interrogate how the role of prediction as a technological phenomenon and discourse, triggers the chain of the 'automatic realisation' of self-fulfilling prophecy.

In psychological terminology Pareidolia, a phenomenon belonging to a larger family called Apophenia, is the fanciful perception or 'misperception' of a pattern or meaning in something that is actually arbitrary. This phenomenon is responsible for experiences ranging from seeing bulls and virgins in the constellations of stars, construction of conspiracy theory, to the vernacular and yet mythical constructions such as 'nephelococcygia', the practice of seeing shapes in clouds. Perception is an active process filtered by a projection of the viewers intentions, of their desires and anxieties. As Jane D. Marsching describes it, "seeing is constructed belief."¹

Divination, fortune-telling, forecasting and predictions as the practice of a *socio-ideological* interpretive system about unforeseen future events, have been employed since our ancestors as a means of temporal guidance and knowledge making. With these beliefs, the universe was codified with meaning and knowledge that informed subjectivity and objectivity and furthermore, the way in which environments were constructed. The esoteric terminology of specific techniques, for example, scrying, geomancy, aeromancy, horary and genethliacal astrology are however, deemed in the our modern era as 'superstitious', a term that came to mean 'misplaced assumptions about causality stemming from a faulty understanding of nature' since the late 18th century when rationalism was the governing hegemony.² Epistemological undertakings of 'acceptable' knowledge and how its value is constructed is underpinned by social and economic endeavors lead by political agenda. In *Reform of Time. Magic and Modernity*, Maureen Perkins, draws examples from 19th century Britain and shows that what counted as 'knowledge', the value of information, was dictated by doctrines of progress; a project that had implications in the development of modern consumerism. Bygone practices nonetheless have been superseded by statistical calculations, something that modern forecasting technologies and algorithms rest on. Prediction, once the preserve of magic and prophecy, has perhaps even more importance to modern secular society. According to Max Weber, accurate calculations as a strategy of *social action* is the foundational principle of development inherent in the process of 'civilization'. What this implies is that forecasting as a consequence can be mobilised to *cause* action in the present, or how Jodorowski insightfully puts it: *provokes* reality. If we consider forecasting through Bruno Latours' sociological view on the scientific discourse as producing its 'facts', then one can say that through the projection our desires, we prepare the environment in which to facilitate it, allowing for our interpretations of the future to become possible. Katherine Hayles also maintains that, "visions of the future, especially in technologically advanced eras, can dramatically affect present developments."³ Perhaps due to computer 'precision', Perkin's argues that statistical calculations are a

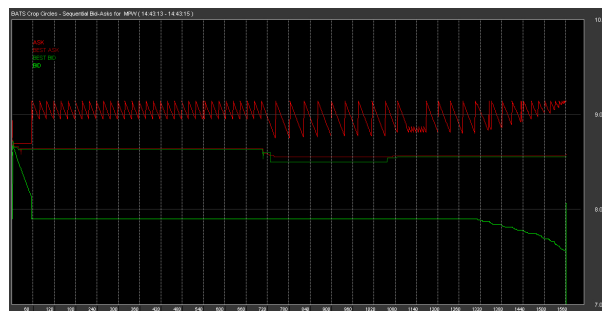
1 Orbs, Blobs, and Glows: Astronauts, UFOs, and Photography Author: Jane D. Marsching. Published by College Art Association.

2 The Reform of Time. Magic and Modernity, 2001, Maureen Perkins. Pluto Press, London.

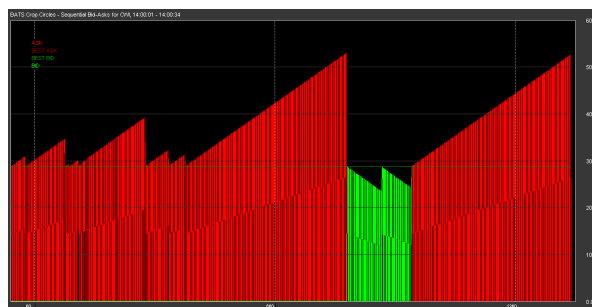
3 Stories about the Future: From Patterns of Expectation to Pattern Recognition. By Veronica Hollinger

powerful measure of excluding alternative interpretations of the future. In a sense, this can be regarded as deterministic, insofar as it sets the limitation for other potentialities to form by defining what 'may' happen. The probability of social action in the now by manipulation of the future, or what futures studies call the "colonisation of the future"⁴ along with the restriction of alternative undesirable narratives, is exactly what makes modern prediction as both an phenomenon and a discourse so powerful.

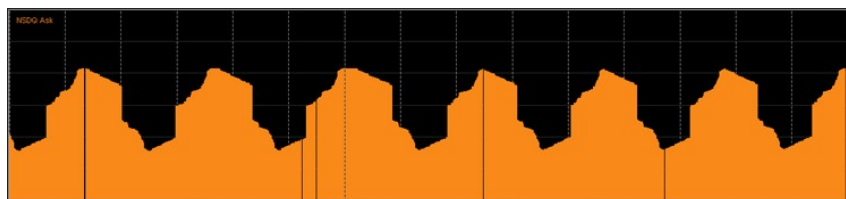
Discourse, from Michel Foucaults' understanding is that, which constructs the topic⁵. By defining and producing the objects of our knowlegde, it also regulates its meaning and the consequent conduct of others. Just as it governs certain acceptable forms of truth, it also defines limitations and restricts the construction of knowlegde itself – of how *reality* is perceived and produced. The discourse of forecasting can be witnessed in its abundance, that is – if you start looking for it...



The Knife



Mountain Range



Cathedral

4 Anthony Giddens: *Modernity and Self-Identity: Self and Society in the Late Modern Age*. Quoted in Maureen Perkins. 2001. pg 13

5 "Foucault: Power, Knowledge and Discourse." *Discourse Theory and Practice*. Ed. M. Wetherell, S. Taylor, and S. Yates. London: Sage, 2001. (Reading seven: by Stuart Hall. Pg 72) . To download: <http://www.google.com/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=1&ved=0CCIQFjAA&url=http%3A%2F%2Fedst.educ.ubc.ca%2Ffiles%2Fcourses%2FHall-Foucault-power%2520knowledge%2520and%2520discourse.pdf&ei=yvTcTurFE8zwsqbskfzqCw&usg=AFQjCNHWtHG4P5wxMwP4HgVZ6pXblC27zA&sig=2=dIHwHvrlVWs-m1Mr-fhbww>

I will look at examples in the paranoid world of stock market predictions and the affects of rating agencies as agents of self-fulfilling prophesy. In Kevin Slavin's talk⁶ about how algorithms are shaping the world, ever-increasing illegible algorithms pervade. For example, in the recent 'Flash Crash' of 2010, enigmatic algorithms were discovered and plotted in the aftermath and christened with names such as "The Knife", "Cathedral" and "Mountain Range", a familiar practice that has been with humans since astrological narratives were told. This case is tellingly nicknamed "Crop circles in Cyberspace" the in the media. In the cultural sector, companies like Epagogix and Platinum Blue provide prediction services for the film and music industry, respectively. While Epagogix analyses film-makers scripts, Platinum Blue "measures the mathematical relationships among all of a song's structural components: melody, harmony, beat, tempo, rhythm, octave, pitch, chord progression, cadence, sonic brilliance, frequency, and so on. On the basis of that analysis, the firm believes it can predict whether a song is likely to become a hit with eighty-percent accuracy."⁷ These examples show at the same time, the deterministic potential of computer calculations and yet the subsequent inextinguishable subjectivities that follow. In contemplating about the increase of justified data through more so-called objective techniques however, I feel that algorithmic interpretations of the future(predictions) are also generating more *subjectivities*, however ones that may be conflictive and thus driven underground...

Bibliography

- Why Has Critique Run out of Steam? From Matters of Fact to Matters of Concern. Bruno Latour. 2004
- Tangent conspiracies lecture. Florian Cramer. 2006. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TjbI8AQi3uA>
- The Weather Imagination, 2005, Luian Boia. Reaktion books, London.
- The Reform of Time. Magic and Modernity, 2001, Maureen Perkins. Pluto Press, London.

Currently reading

- Stories about the Future: From Patterns of Expectation to Pattern Recognition. Veronica Hollinger
- Article in the New Yorker: The formula. *What if you built a machine to predict hit movies?* by M. Gladwell
- Orbs, Blobs, and Glows: Astronauts, UFOs, and Photography. Author: Jane D. Marsching
- Visions of the future: almanacs, time, and cultural change, 1775-1870. Maureen Perkins
- Super Freakonomics. Steven Levitt and Stephen J. Dubner

Further readings and research material

- Of the Standard of Taste and Other Essays. David Hume
 - The Golden Bough by James Frazer. (Chapter 5. The Magical Control of the Weather). 1922
 - The crying lot of 49. Thomas Pynchon. 1966
 - The Foundation by Isaac Asimov
 - The Conspiracy of Art. Jean Baudrillard.
 - <http://en.pleintekst.nl/tags/cultural%20theory/>
 - <http://en.pleintekst.nl/tags/systems/>
 - <http://www.aber.ac.uk/media/Documents/S4B/sem02.html>
 - <http://discontents.com.au/words/articles/inigo-jones-the-weather-prophet>
 - http://blog.ted.com/2009/04/07/3_predictions_o/
 - <http://www.metafuture.org/articlesbycolleagues/IvanaMilojevic/women-futures-studies.htm>
 - http://books.google.nl/books/about/Rescuing_all_our_futures.html?id=7QMZAAAAYAAJ&redir_esc=y
- Ziauddin Sardar

⁶ Kevin Slavin's talk at Ted: http://www.ted.com/talks/kevin_slavin_how_algorithms_shape_our_world.html?c=289257

⁷ The formula. *What if you built a machine to predict hit movies?* by M. Gladwell

Inspiration/Projects/artists/etc.

-<http://www.blackshoals.net/project.html> (Black Shoals Stock Market Planetarium is an art project created by Joshua Portway and Lise Autogena.)

-<http://www.neural.it/nnews/news14carolinahacke.htm>

-“high attitude”, Michael Najjar "<http://www.younggalleryphoto.com/photography/najjar/najjar.html>

-Pi. Movie by Darren Aronofsky 1998

-http://www.1010.co.uk/org/scrying_rotterdam.html#sec-16

-<http://www.v2.nl/news/physiognomic-scrutinizer-on-tour>

-http://www.marnixdenijs.nl/physiognomic_scrutinizer.htm

-la jetee

-12 monkeys